



The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

HENRY WINSTANLEY (1644-1703)

Henry Winstanley was a painter, engraver, engineer and inventor. He built the first Eddystone lighthouse, pictured here.

Henry was born in Saffron Walden, the eldest of the eight children of Henry and Anne Winstanley. He was baptised on 31st March 1644 in St Mary's church and educated at a grammar school in the town. In 1683 Henry married Elizabeth Taylor, daughter of John Taylor, Rector of Westmill, Hertfordshire. They had no children.

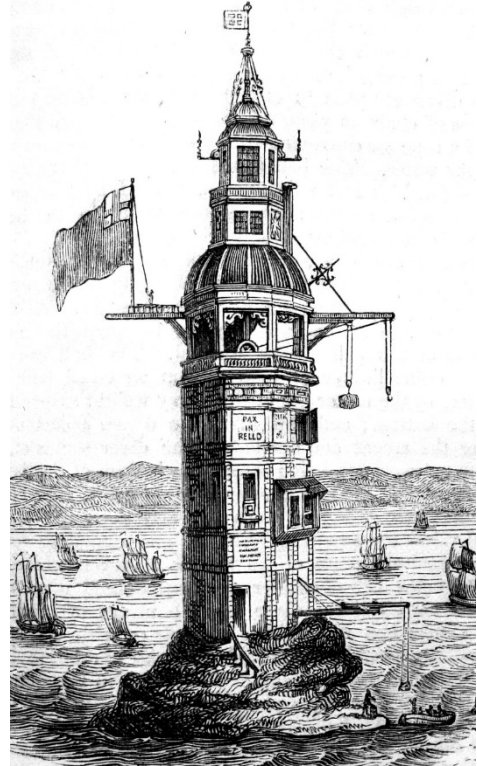
Henry's love of architecture was stimulated by the grand tour he undertook in 1669. He once installed a wooden lantern on top of the west tower of Saffron Walden parish church to test its resilience.

He was made clerk of works for the Audley End estate in 1679. He completed a set of engravings of Audley End House and these survive as an important source of historical interest of how the house once looked. In 1679 he moved into his new house in Littlebury, on the south side of Mill Lane, opposite the church.

On the front of the building, he incorporated two clocks and on the roof there was a large lantern to guide guests to his home. Inside the house he installed all manner of funfair-style mechanisms, including joke chairs which moved when sat upon. Some descended into the cellar and another tipped its occupant into the garden. All these contraptions were known as Winstanley's Wonders and an entrance fee was charged to visitors. After Henry's death, his widow continued to live at Littlebury until her death in 1721, keeping it open to the paying public. The house was demolished in the 1780s.

In London's Piccadilly, Henry opened a theatre known as Winstanley's Water Works. This visitor attraction was commercially very successful. It included fountains, mechanical curiosities and fireworks. It continued to draw visitors for some time after his death.

In 1692 Henry was asked to build a lighthouse on the chain of reefs know as Eddystone Rocks, fourteen miles out to sea from Plymouth. These treacherous rocks had claimed many ships over the years with the resulting loss of life. Henry joined a private consortium and put his own money into the venture. The work started in July 1696 and the lighthouse, made entirely of wood was completed in 1698. Sixty candles installed in the lantern at the top of the structure acted as a warning beacon to passing ships. When it was discovered that sometimes the waves completely covered the structure, Henry redesigned and rebuilt it. He reinforced the walls and added 40 feet (12 metres) to the original 90-foot (29-metre) tower. It was a commercial venture with passing ships being charged a penny a ton for the protection they received.



Henry was a regular visitor to the lighthouse and in November 1703 he was there undertaking some repairs when a fierce storm blew up. This was later known as The Great Storm which caused much destruction across England. The lighthouse was swept away and Henry and the lighthouse keepers all died. During the five years that Henry's lighthouse stood on Eddystone Rocks, no ships were wrecked.

There have been four structures built on Eddystone Rocks. The second, Rudyard's lighthouse, was destroyed by fire. The third, built by John Smeaton in 1759, was notable in the development of the use of concrete. The current lighthouse, designed by James Douglass, has protected shipping since 1882.

Further reading:

Henry Winstanley and the Eddystone Lighthouse, Adam Hart-Davis & Emily Troscianko, published by Sutton, 2002.

Henry Winstanley, the last Renaissance Engineer, Martin Rose, 2024

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